Minangkabau seals in Negeri Sembilan

Malay seals are in general extremely reliable historical witnesses. In the inscriptions there is care and consistency in the use of names and titles; pedigrees are generally biologically precise; the toponyms refer to the place of office or the abode of the sealholder; and the dates on the seals can be taken to apply either to the date of manufacture of the seal or the date of bestowal of the official title of the sealholder, in either case contributing important biographical data. There also appears to have been commensurate care in their use, and it is rare to come across a seal impression on a document which raises questions about its validity.

A very different seal culture flourished in one part of Islamic Southeast Asia: the Minangkabau highlands of west Sumatra. The kingdom of Minangkabau enjoyed enormous prestige in the Malay world. In Malay chronicles the kings of Minangkabau were said to share descent from Sultan Iskandar Zulkarnain (Alexander the Great) with the emperors of Rum (Turkey) and China.

While most Malay seal inscriptions refer to an identifiable individual, the Minangkabau rulers used symbolic seals of office which did not designate a particular ruler, but rather the institution of kingship itself, through the use of symbolic regnal titles such as Sultan Mahaeja Diraja, Sultan Iskandar Zulkarnain and Sultan Abdul Jalil Musazzam Syah associated with the legendary founders of the kingdom. The Minangkabau kings also dispensed ‘seals of patronage’, whereby the sovereign — always referred to by the generic regnal name ‘Sultan Abdul Jalil’ (there is no known historical sultan of Minangkabau of that name) — granted authority to the holder of the seal, in the following words: Sultan Abdul Jalil, who possesses the throne of sovereignty in the state of Minangkabau, acknowledges as his scion Sultan X, who possesses the throne of sovereignty in the state of Y, granting him authority over the people/territory of Z.

The prestige of the Minangkabau court was such that, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, even a tenuous claim to Minangkabau affiliation proved a great boon to political ambition. During this period the use of Minangkabau royal seals and seals of patronage proliferated in the broad area (runtai) of traditional migration from west Sumatra, often in much more lax circumstances than would have been sanctioned by other Malay chanceries. In some ways, the use of the royal name in Minangkabau could be likened to the modern usage of government stationery marked ‘On Her Majesty’s Service’ in the UK, or the Malaysian equivalent ‘Urusan Seri Paduka Baginda’.

Minangkabau influence is strongly felt across the Straits of Melaka in Negeri Sembilan, home to many settlers from Sumatra, and is manifested on seals. A large number of Negeri Sembilan seals cite as their font of authority Sultan Abdul Jalil Musazzam Syah (Rembau, Ulu Muar, Seri Menanti, Tampin), Sultan Muhammad Jalil (Sungai Ujong) or Sultan Musazzam Syah (Zelebu). All these names can be interpreted as deriving from the symbolic Minangkabau regnal title of Sultan Abdul Jalil, and reflect the deeply-held respect for Minangkabau as the source of political institutions in Negeri Sembilan.

Right: Minangkabau seal of patronage used by Jali Ali, 2nd Yang Dipertuan Muda of Rembau (c.1812 – 1832), Negeri Sembilan, inscribed: Sultan Abdul Jalil yang mempunyai tahta kerajaan negeri Minangkabau mengaku anak isteri Sultan Abdul Mukhidin yang mempunyai tahta kerajaan negeri Jambi memenyahakan raib save akti Gunung kerapi hilir hingga ke dalam Jambi sedati Sultan Abdul Jalil, who possesses the throne of sovereignty in the state of Minangkabau, acknowledges as his scion Sultan Abdul Mukhidin, who possesses the throne of sovereignty in the state of Jambi, granting him authority over the people up to the foot of Gunung Kerapi, downstream to the Jambi river mouth and back upstream (2367), 75 mm, impressed on a letter to T.S. Raffles in Melaka, 10 Sater 1226/12 March 1811 (for the letter text see Almat 2009: 88 – 93). BL MS Kato 5745/1, f. 22.
Minangkabau seals in Negeri Sembilan

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Seal collectors

Seal matrices in the form of gemstones have always been a magnet for connoisseurs, as reflected in the important collections of engraved seal stones held in museums and private collections today and in palaces across the Islamic world. Seal impressions have never been 'collectable' in the same way as seal matrices, for obvious reasons, but there have nonetheless been a handful of indomitable enthusiasts, who have bequeathed us important resources for the study of seal inscriptions.

Lewin Bentham Bowring (1824 – 1910) spent his career in the Indian Civil Service. From 1858 to 1862 he was private secretary to the Viceroy of India, Lord Canning, a privileged platform from which he could indulge his real passion, which was the study of royal genealogies of India. For each Indian princely state, Bowring attempted to collect as completely as possible examples of the letters, seals, signatures and portraits of each ruler, as well as compiling a genealogical table and map of the territory, all in his minuscule but exquisite handwriting. The fruits of his labours originally filled three albums, but now occupy twenty large volumes in the British Library (MS. 11162, 11164 – 11166). In addition to the sealed letters in the collection, many more seal impressions were cut out from their original documents, and Bowring has often provided a reading of the inscription. His albums are an extraordinarily rich resource for Islamic seals from India, but also extend to Oman and Zanzibar in the west and the Malay peninsula and Sumatra in the east, with some notable items from Siam, where his father Sir John Bowring had negotiated a treaty with King Mongkut in 1855.

Another seal collector was Sidney Churchill (1862 – 1921), who from 1886 to 1898 held the post of Second Secretary at the British Legation in Tehran, where his brother Harry had been appointed Vice-Consul in 1883. Sidney Churchill formed an important collection of Persian manuscripts and documents (now in the British Library, including many of the Safavid and Qajar firmans with seals reproduced in this book. Less well known is his 'Confidential' Biographical Index of Persian notables, produced in 1904 for the British Government, containing secret briefings on individuals. Each entry was accompanied by examples of their seals, which Churchill had cut out and stuck into the album (see also 3.10).
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Above and right: Seal of Maharaja Ranjore Singh of Ajaigah (c.1855–1919), with his name in the centre surrounded by the names of 32 preceding rulers of Ajaigah (80 mm), with a key drawn by L.B. Bowring (90 mm). The design is clearly inspired by the genealogical seal of the Moghal emperors (see 4.6). R.I. MS. Rec. 19.1.1069 4-b q.

Right: Fatima of Shab Xafi, in her own hand, relating to a gift presented by ... Abd al-Razzaq of Khubani, 1039/1630. Sidney Churchill collection. II, no. 1938, 54.

Ranjit Singh of Ajitgarh (1855–1919), added by the names of 32 preceding rulers of ... by L.B. Bowring (90 mm). The design is a seal of the Mughal emperors (see p.6).
The role of decoration in Islamic seals has always been to support and enhance the inscription, not to overwhelm it. Decoration does however become an increasingly significant component of Islamic seals from around the sixteenth century onwards, and is one of the most important factors that can help to date a seal and establish its geographical origin.

The main decorative feature is sometimes the shape of the seal itself. Persian seals often had a headpiece shaped like a mihrab, the niche in a mosque wall indicating the direction of Mecca (5.2). Malay seals from Southeast Asia usually had beautifully petalled floral shapes, inspired by the lotus blossom (5.3). The lotus flower is a symbol of purity in Hinduism and Buddhism, which were the major religions in the Malay archipelago before the coming of Islam.

Decoration on Islamic seals can be found across the inscription ground or in a border around the writing. The earliest Islamic seals were generally quite bare apart from the writing, but some bear simple stars or a crescent, continuing a decorative tradition found in pre-Islamic Sassanian seals from Iran. Later seals often have flowers or arabesques – the scrolling floral vines so characteristic of Islamic art – scattered across the surface. Ornamental motifs were carved with a finer chisel than used for the inscription, so that they appear to recede into the background. The frame around the writing could be another focus for ornamentation, and was the main canvas for decoration in Malay seals. In general the decoration on Islamic seals is confined to floral, foliate and geometric motifs, but throughout the ages there have been occasional seals with pictorial elements, even including living creatures (5.6).

By the nineteenth century heraldic motifs can increasingly be seen on Islamic seals (5.10). The state emblem of the lion and the rising sun is found on seals from the Qajar dynasty in Iran. The flamboyant rulers of the Indian state of Awadh commissioned what are probably the largest and most ornate Islamic seals ever created, topped with the royal arms of the fish, sword and crown.

Left: Seal of Nasir al-Din Shah of Iran (r.1848 – 1896), inscribed: al-mulk ullah ta’ala. Ta ki dast-i-Nasir al-Din hutam-i-shahi giraf, Suti-i-dad u ma’alat az mahl ta mahl giraf, 1264, ‘To God the Exalted belongs the kingdom. As soon as Nasir al-Din was rewarded with the kingdom, his justice was felt even by the moon and fish 1264/1847 – 8’. (Rubino di Borgomale 1951: 203). 197EM 2012.11.7

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